The Roman Conquest of Italy

From its founding, traditionally dated to 753 BC, up to the final conquest of Italy in 270 BC, Rome transformed from a small city-state in Italy to the master of the entire peninsula. Through a long period of conquest, accomplished just as much with political and diplomatic efforts as with military might, the Romans established themselves as a major power and sowed the seeds of what would later become one of history’s great empires.

Sources for the Conquests

Most of what we know about Rome’s rise to power comes from Livy’s History of Rome, a monumental work covering events from the founding of the city down to the rise of the emperor Augustus. Livy was writing around 25 BC, centuries after most of the events he covered, and the work is a mixture of fact and myth. It is often hard to separate the two, and so much of what we know about the early history of Rome is shrouded in myth. Livy was as interested in telling a good story, imparting moral lessons, and glorifying Rome, as he was in accurately reporting events, and so we cannot take everything he wrote at face value. In addition, only about a quarter of Livy’s work actually survives, though other ancient historians were reliant on Livy’s work, so some of what he wrote survives in the work of later writers. The events described below are based on a critical reading of Livy’s account, but one must be cognizant that some of it might be legend, or biased in favor of Rome.

Early Conquests

According to legend, Rome was founded by the twins Romulus and Remus in 753 BC. The two brothers were descended from the royalty of the nearby city Alba Longa, but were cast out as infants after their grandfather was overthrown and the new king tried to eliminate them to protect his throne. It is famously said that Romulus killed Remus in a dispute over where to found the city. According to Livy, Romulus then invited outcasts and undesirables from the surrounding regions to populate his city. From its beginning, Rome was in conflict with its neighbors. According to a legend told by Livy, shortly after the founding of the city, the Romans, being mostly men, abducted the wives of the Sabines, a nearby tribe. Rome was one of many cities in a region of Italy known as Latium. The people of Latium spoke a common language, Latin, and recognized the same gods and similar religious festivals, but lived in independent city-states that often came into conflict. In this way the Latins were much like the Greeks, though for a long time they were less powerful.

The city-state of Rome was also heavily influenced by its northern neighbors, the Etruscans, who lived in Etruria, the region known today as Tuscany. The last three kings of Rome were in fact Etruscans, who were elected by the Roman people for their skill at governance. The Etruscans were also a threat, however, and the cities of Etruria often attacked the cities of Latium. The most serious Etruscan rival of Rome was the
city of Veii, the richest Etruscan city, located dangerously close to Rome on the opposite side of the Tibur.

In order to defend themselves against the Etruscan cities, the cities of Latium allied to defend each other. This alliance was called the Latin League and it was led by the city of Alba Longa. Under the last few Roman kings, the city of Rome eventually came into conflict with Alba Longa, and war ensued. Rome emerged victorious and destroyed Alba Longa, transporting its population to Rome. The aristocrats of Alba Longa were allowed to join the Roman Senate (the Julii, from which Julius Caesar was descended, were an aristocratic Alban family), and the people became integrated into the Roman state. This demonstrates one of the most important aspects of Rome’s strategy in conquering Italy: it offered the conquered a place in Roman society and made such people part of the Roman system.

Soon after the conquest of Alba Longa, under Rome’s last king, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, the Latin League was made to recognize Rome’s dominance. With the help of troops from other cities, Tarquinius Superbus conquered neighboring towns that were not members of the league. In 509 BC, however, the Romans overthrew him and formed a republic. According to the version of events told by Livy, the exiled king found the support of the Etruscan king Lars Porsenna and the Etruscan cities of Veii and Tarquinii, as well as the Latin League. Porsenna and the Etruscans failed to take Rome and the Romans defeated the Latin League at the Battle of Lake Regillus. With this victory, the Romans reasserted their dominance over the Latin League with the Foedus Cassianum, the “Treaty of Cassius.” Rome was now separate from the Latin League, which represented the other powerful cities of Latium, but Rome was made equal in power to all of the members of the league combined. Rome and the members of the Latin League agreed to each bear half the cost of the defense of Latium.

Means of Conquest

Under the republic, Rome continued to fight neighboring cities, though now each of the two consuls who shared power in Rome commanded his own consular army. The Roman army was composed of citizens, and was not yet a professional army. Only property owners served in the armies, and their rank was determined by the amount of property they owned. Soldiers would supply their own equipment, so the more money a man possessed the better his arms, and the few who could afford horses fought mounted. The army would gather for a campaign season, fight, and disband in time for the soldiers to return to their farms to harvest the crops. Because the early Roman Republic had no full-time military, it could not occupy large swaths of land. Instead, it had to devise other strategies for keeping its growing Italian empire under its control.

One of the most important tools the Roman Republic had in its conquest of Italy was the power to grant Roman citizenship. Unlike the Greeks, who were generally stingy with the right of citizenship in a city, the Romans used it as a stick and carrot in their relations to other cities. Some cities were given full Roman citizenship: this meant that they could vote in the elections of Roman officials (if they made the journey all the way to Rome at the time of an election), run for office, and serve in the Roman legions.
They paid taxes to Rome, but this gave the new citizens a sense of being a part of the Roman government and helped instill loyalty to Rome. Full citizens could marry Romans, and thus become integrated into Roman society. Full citizenship spread Roman culture and helped transform many areas of Italy into part of a larger Roman world. It also meant more citizens for Rome, which meant a larger population and army.

The people of other cities were made *civitas sine suffragio*, “citizens without the right to vote.” This conferred many of the same benefits and honors as full citizenship, and “half citizens” could still trade with Romans, fight in the army, and intermarry with Roman citizens. Still, this sort of citizenship was generally granted to people with different customs or languages. Since it withheld the ability to vote or run for office, it kept such citizens from having undue influence over the Roman government. Full citizenship could be held out as an eventual reward for continued loyalty.

A lesser status conferred on some cities was the *ius Latinum*, “Latin Rights.” This got its name from the status given to many members of the Latin League after it was disbanded by Rome. The Latin Rights allowed holders to trade with Romans, intermarry, and hold property in Rome or any other city in Rome’s confederation. The Latin Rights were usually the first step in acquiring some level of Roman citizenship.

Finally, some cities were simply made *socii*, allies. The populations of these cities were not citizens. Such cities had far more autonomy and could govern their cities free from Roman interference. In exchange, they had to recognize the superiority of Rome and have their foreign affairs dictated by Rome. They had to contribute soldiers to the Roman armies, though these soldiers would fight in separate units, not as part of the Roman legions. Such status was conferred on people with very different customs, or recently defeated enemies not yet ready to be integrated into the Roman system. It was also conferred on areas not deemed important enough to be granted citizenship.

The Romans also sometimes created colonies in conquered towns. Such colonies were populated with Roman citizens and had governments modeled on that of the Roman Republic. Roman colonists led these governments and spread Roman social and political culture. Such colonies were considered militarily essential: they were outposts of Roman control, they could remain on the lookout for nearby enemies, and they acted as garrisons at a time when Rome did not have a standing military.

**Victory and Defeat**

Despite the growing power of Rome, the Romans and their Latin allies faced a new threat in the Aequi and Volsci, people who migrated from the Apennine Mountains in the middle of the Italian peninsula and occupied Latium, south of Rome. Still, the Romans were able to keep these new enemies at bay. In addition, after a ten-year siege, Rome finally defeated its rival city of Veii in 396 BC, and the people of Veii were enrolled as Roman citizens.

Just six years later, however, Rome suffered one of its most serious major reversals. A band of invading Gallic tribesmen defeated the Romans in battle and followed up their victory by sacking Rome. It was a disaster for the Romans, and they ultimately had to pay the Gauls to leave the city.
After this embarrassment, the Romans returned to their conquests with a heightened sense of fury. They reorganized the army, making it larger and more flexible. The Romans defeated the Volsci and also overran the Etruscan cities, which had been weakened by the same Gallic invaders who had sacked Rome. Soon Rome was the undisputed power in central Italy. Rome and the Latin League next went to war with the Samnites, an aggressive mountain people from the middle of Italy.

Soon, however, conflict arose between Rome and its Latin allies. The member states of the Latin League sent an embassy to the Roman Senate requesting membership in the Roman Senate and increased influence in Roman policy. The Romans refused. Thus, in 340 BC, the Latin League revolted against Rome, and the Romans were faced with a dangerous enemy in their former allies. The Romans, however, turned to the Samnites as new allies. An alliance of Romans and Samnites defeated the Latin League. In 338 BC the league was more or less disbanded; its member cities became subject to Rome, and each was granted different levels of citizenship, with many given “Latin Rights.” The former members of the league were not allowed to make their own policy, or make economic or political agreements with any other city. The Romans were now the masters of Latium.

*The Samnite Wars*

Despite the aid the Samnites had given them in the war against the Latin League, the Romans soon turned on their former allies. The Second Samnite War broke out in 326 BC when Neapolis, the modern-day city of Naples, which was a Greek colony, asked for Roman aid against the Samnites. The Romans scored some early victories and the Samnites sued for peace, which the Romans refused. Instead they sent an army into Samnite territory, but the army was trapped in a mountain pass at the bloodless Battle of Caudine Forks and forced to surrender. The Samnite leader, Gaius Pontius, did not know what to do with the Roman soldiers at his mercy. According to the legend told by Livy, he asked his father for advice. His father suggested that Pontius spare the Romans and let them go unharmed and thus gain the good will of Rome. When Pontius rejected this as too lenient, his father then suggested he kill every last one of the trapped Romans, so as to weaken Rome by eliminating its army. Pontius rejected this as too harsh. Against his father’s advice he aimed for a middle ground: he disgraced the Romans by forcing them to undergo a humiliating ritual of passing under a yoke, and then let them go. Livy used this as a parable that the middle way is not always best: the Romans, humiliated, were eager for revenge and returned to fight the Samnites again. The Samnites and Romans became the most bitter of enemies. Pontius was eventually captured and killed by the Romans. Neapolis and other Greek cities of southern Italy fell into the Roman sphere of influence.

The Romans, according to Livy, gained some victories after the embarrassment at the Caudine Forks, but in 315 BC they suffered another defeat at the hands of the Samnites at the Battle of Lautulae. This time there was bloodshed, and the Romans suffered heavy losses. Livy minimizes the extent of the defeat, but it seems to have been a terrible setback for the Romans. Gradually they recovered from the defeat and adopted Samnite tactics, which would influence the creation of the tough infantryman.
that came to characterize the Roman army. In 305 BC the Romans ended the war with a victory at the Battle of Bovianum. The Samnites sued for peace on terms favorable to the Romans. The Third Samnite War broke out in 298 BC, with an alliance of the Samnites with the Etruscans, Gauls, and various other enemies of Rome. Faced with all its enemies at once, the Romans fought bitterly, and won. The Samnites surrendered in 291 and were forced to become *socii*, subservient to Rome. Soon after, the Romans pushed into the territory of the Gauls living in northern Italy. Though it would take many years and several costly defeats, the Romans eventually captured the lands around the Po River from the Gauls.

The Samnite Wars, besides leading to Rome’s victory over the last remaining serious rival for control over Italy, saw the construction of important Roman public works. In 312 BC, a powerful Roman named Appius Claudius Caecus commissioned a major road to Campania, where much of the fighting was taking place. Named the Via Appia after Appius, it was the first of the great roads, which allowed Roman armies to march quickly to battle, and which would spread over Europe as the empire grew. Appius Claudius Caecus also commissioned the first aqueduct for Rome, which brought water to the now burgeoning Roman population. Rome was becoming a major city and the dominant cultural and political force in Italy.

*The Pyrrhic Wars*

With the Samnites subdued, the Romans now looked to gain control over the Greek cities of southern Italy. Neapolis and other Greek cities had appealed to Rome for aid against the Samnites, but now that the Samnites were no longer a danger, Rome became the new threat, and there was no one left in Italy to stop the Romans.

Thus, the Greek city of Tarentum (modern-day Taranto) asked for aid from Pyrrhus of Epirus, a Macedonian king and cousin of Alexander the Great. Pyrrhus dreamed of equaling the deeds of his famous relative, and saw Italy as a perfect proving ground for his military abilities. Thus, he arrived in Italy with over 20,000 foot soldiers, 3,000 cavalry, and 20 war elephants. The elephants proved to be a particularly useful weapon: the Romans had never seen such creatures before and were frightened of them. In 280 BC, at the Battle of Herculanea, Pyrrhus inflicted a heavy defeat on the Romans, though he lost many of his best men. The next year, he defeated the Romans again at the Battle of Asculum, but he lost a significant portion of his army. He famously remarked, “Another such victory and I will be finished.” This has led to the term *Pyrrhic victory*, which is synonymous with a victory so costly that it is not worth the loss.

Worried about losing more men to the Romans in such victories, Pyrrhus left for Sicily to defend the Greek cities there from the growing power of the Carthaginians. He fared similarly in Sicily, winning victories but never quite able to win the war. Thus, in an attempt to save face he returned to fight the Romans again in 275 BC, attempting to finally achieve a decisive victory against them. He met the Roman army at the town of Malventum. His dreams of victory were dashed when the Romans defeated his forces, and his elephants, in a panic, demolished his own battle line. The Romans renamed the site of the battle Beneventum in celebration. Pyrrhus departed Italy in shame, and the Greek city-states had little choice but to surrender their autonomy to Rome. In 272
BC Tarentum surrendered, and two years later Rome conquered Rhegium, the last independent Greek city in Italy. Rome now controlled Italy. In the meantime, the Roman victory over Pyrrhus proved the abilities of the Roman military against the mighty Macedonian army, suddenly making Rome well known on the world stage.

Aftermath

Though Rome achieved undisputed control over Italy, it initially ruled more of a loose confederation than a unified empire. The various cities of Italy had different levels of citizenship and different degrees of autonomy from Rome, and this patchwork was the heart of the empire with which the Romans began their overseas conquests. While some peoples were eager to take advantage of their new place in the Roman system, others harbored only anger and resentment toward the Romans and yearned for independence. The Samnites, for example, were constantly rebellious, and joined with Rome’s enemies such as Pyrrhus and later Hannibal. They suffered from backing these unsuccessful invaders, but they would always support the enemies of Rome.

When Pyrrhus departed Italy, he supposedly said “What a battlefield I am leaving for Carthage and Rome.” Indeed, soon these two powers came into conflict over Sicily, sparking the First Punic War. During the Second Punic War, the Carthaginian general Hannibal attempted to destroy Rome by invading Italy and persuading the cities of Italy to abandon their allegiance to Rome. He defeated Rome in battle after battle, but failed to convince the Italians to abandon Rome. Thus, Hannibal was unable to overcome the Romans.

Still, it would take a very long time before the patchwork confederation the Romans had built would turn into a unified center of their empire. As the Roman Republic came to dominate the Mediterranean world, the cities of Italy were eager for a greater stake in this conquest, especially the socii. They supplied about half of Rome’s military manpower, but lacked citizenship. They demanded that all cities in Italy be given Roman citizenship and the right to vote. In 91 BC, when the Roman Senate refused, they rebelled. Just as in the war with the Latin League 250 years earlier, the Romans found themselves at war with their closest allies. In this conflict, known as the Social War, the Romans survived by agreeing to grant full citizenship to any allied city that remained loyal. Eventually, it also granted such citizenship to the cities that surrendered. These concessions weakened the resolve of the Italian cities to fight, and they quickly surrendered to the Romans.

Soon, the only forces holding out against the Romans were the Samnites, the most bitter of Rome’s foes. They became embroiled in Rome’s first civil war, which followed immediately on the heels of the Social War. In 82 BC, the Samnites threatened Rome and attacked its Colline Gate, but the dictator Lucius Cornelius Sulla defeated them. The Samnites that survived the battle were taken into the city and executed, their tortured screams used to frighten Sulla’s enemies in the Senate. This was effectively the end of the Samnites.

By granting the Italian cities full voting rights at the end of the Social War, Rome had given them exactly what they wanted. Within a few generations, the people of Italy soon regarded themselves as Romans. The loose confederation, the patchwork of
allies and citizens of different ranks, became a unified Italian base of power from which the Roman Empire would grow.

Summary

- Our knowledge of the Roman conquest of Italy comes primarily from Livy. He is the most important source, but he was writing long after the conquest, and his work is a mixture of fact and myth. His work also seeks to glorify the Romans and teach moral lessons. Thus, we must be cautious about what we accept in Livy’s account.
- The city of Rome, supposedly founded in 753 BC, was located in Latium, a region of central Italy that shared Latin language and culture, but Rome was also influenced by the Etruscan cities to the north.
- The cities of Latium formed the Latin League for mutual defense against the Etruscans. Though the league was originally headed by the city of Alba Longa, the Romans conquered this city and took control of the League.
- After the Romans overthrew their king in 509 BC, the king fled to the Etruscans, and also found support from the Latin League. The Romans defeated these allies of their old king, and negotiated the Treaty of Cassius, which made Rome separate from the Latin League and gave it half of the control of Latium, while all the members of the League combined shared the other half.
- The Romans continued the conquest of Italy and conquered their most dangerous early rival, the city of Veii, but soon after, they faced a major setback when the Gauls sacked Rome.
- After the sack, the Romans quickly recovered and reformed, and continued their conquests. When the Latin League demanded more influence and a greater role in Rome’s government, the Romans refused and war ensued. With the help of the Samnites, the Romans defeated the Latin League and disbanded it, giving the member cities different levels of rights and citizenship.
- The Romans then went to war with the Samnites. After three bloody wars, in which the Romans and Samnites became bitter enemies, the Romans reduced the Samnites to subject allies.
- The Greek cities of southern Italy, alarmed by the growing power of Rome, called on the Macedonian king Pyrrhus of Epirus to defend them. Pyrrhus won some costly victories against the Romans, but was ultimately defeated at the Battle of Beneventum. This proved the abilities of the Roman military against a foreign enemy.
- With the defeat of Pyrrhus, the Romans gained control of nearly all of Italy. However, it would take many years for the patchwork confederation the Romans built to turn into a unified center of their empire. It was not until the Social War of 91–88 BC that all the cities of Italy gained citizenship, and it was still a few more generations before all Italians came to regard themselves as Roman.